DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 583 CS 205 220

AUTHOR Glasser, Theodore L.
TITLE The Aesthetics of News. Revised.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (62nd, Houston, Texas, August 5-8, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Services; Journalism; *Local Issues; News Media; *Newspapers; *News Reporting

ABSTRACT

That every community needs its own distinctive newspaper is the conclusion drawn in this review of the literature on journalism and communication. Following a summary of John Dewey's definition of democracy in the introduction, the first section of the paper points out the conflict that newspapers experience in trying to be a news source reflecting a local culture and trying to reach as large and amorphous a readership as their circulation departments might conceive. The second section presents the two principal dimensions of news--the instrumental (a phase of action) and the consummatory (simply pleasurable)--that lead to the concept of the aesthetic experience of news. The last section discusses the need for a newspaper to exhibit a concern for local understanding, an awareness of local language, and an appreciation for the integrity of local conditions. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

revised

ED177583

THE AESTHETICS OF NEWS

By

Theodore L. Glasser
Assistant Professor

Department of Communication Arts
University of Hartford

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Theodore L. Glasser

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS205220

Presented to the Qualitative Studies Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Houston, Texas, August 1979.

THE AESTHETICS OF NEWS

Better than most, John Dewey seemed to sense the important role communication plays in the survival of our democracy. In a series of lectures at Kenyon College in 1926, (1) Dewey expressed his appreciation and concern for a nation made smaller through communication, a society torn between the cosmopolitanizing forces of industrialization and urbanization and what sociologist Robert Nisbet describes as the necessary conditions under which a liberal democracy will thrive: "diversity of culture, plurality of association, and division of authority." (2)

The problems of democracy, in Dewey's view, are rooted in changing social relations; and the problem of changing social relations, Dewey reminds us, is essentially one of communication. Belman elaborates:

> Modernization had brought about a 'Great Society' in that America was now a single social entity from coast to coast, linked and made interdependent through the conjunction of giant commercial organizations and a vast network of rapid communications. This 'Great Society' . . . had in fact disrupted the prior communal-settlement forms of American life, creating what Dewey believed to be serious consequences for democracy. (3)

Thus from Dewey's perspective democracy is more than a type of government; it is primarily a form of association, a kind of "conjoint communicated experience." As an idea, Dewey insisted,

"democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community itself." (4). Or as Belman puts it, "community is inherently democratic, and democracy is inherently communal." (5)

Dewey's emphasis on community is important for two reasons. First, since the contours of our democracy are subsumed under the principles of community, it follows that the demise or eclipse of our communities necessarily weakens or erodes the very foundation on which our democracy rests. For without a clear sense of belonging, a feeling of association, the individual as citizen finds it difficult to engage in cooperative activity; and the consequences of isolated behavior, Dewey cautioned, differ in kind from those of collective action. Second, there is an important, though often neglected, connection between community and communication:

> There is more than a mere verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge--a common understanding--like-mindedness as the sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another, like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces. The communication which insures participation in a common understanding

> is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions--like ways of responding to expectations and requirements. (6)

In short, since community is created and maintained by and through communication, and since the creation and maintenance of community is essential to a genuinely democratic state, it follows that the viability of democracy hinges on the quality of communication.

I

The home of democracy, according to Dewey, is the neighborly community, an often less than discrete territory for which a variety of sociological and anthropological representations exist. (7) Cast against the predominantly rural communities of the nineteenth century, today's neighborhoods may rely less on consensus and solidarity and more on the "partial and differentiated" involvement of its residents, (8) but what remains essentially unchanged is the quest for community, which is as much an American preoccupation today as it was a century ago. For what endures is the vital role community can play in fulfilling one of the most basic of all human needs: "the desire to find a social setting in which one can give rein to an authentic version of oneself." (9)

It is hardly surprising, then, that in the United States there is a peculiarly local emphasis on our agencies of communication, most notably the press; it is what Bagdikian calls the "unique imperative of the American social system":

> No other country approaches this degree of localism in news institutions. In Russia, for example, metropolitan Moscow has less than 3 percent of total U.S.S.R. population, but Moscow-based dailies have 87 percent of all Russian daily circulation. In Japan, metropolitan Tokyo has 11 percent of national population, but Tokyo-based dailies have 70 percent of national circulation. In Britain, metropolitan London has 14 percent of population, but its dailies have 70 percent of national circulation.
>
> In contrast, metropolitan New York and Washington, D.C. together have 6.6 percent of national population and together their daily newspapers supply only 9.6 percent of daily papers throughout the country. (10)

But the localism to which Bagdikian refers obscures the difference between abundance and diversity. For while we are richly abundant in newspapers and other media of communication, most Americans are trapped in what Schiller calls a "no-choice informational bind," a condition endemic to mass communication. (11) Significantly, most of the day's news comes to us by way of a network or syndicate of one kind or another; today most newspapers serve as derivative "outlets" in that they derive their content from a handful of generative media. (12) A story produced in and for a particular community is the exception, not the rule; more often than not, when journalists pursue an item of local interest they invest it with universal appeal, thus insuring a wide and profitable

circulation--a circulation often enhanced by the wire services and other "wholesalers" of news.

Thus in our major urban areas, where the idea of community becomes manifest as a composite of mutually dependent and yet substantially sovereign neighborhoods, the press does little to preserve the integrity of a city's cultural diversity. Similarly, in our sprawling suburbs, where mobility and distance create a special need for local communication, the perspective of the press typically transcends any of the many communities it serves. Unwittingly or not, journalists seldom render the realities of a city's or suburb's diverse culture because journalists seldom tell their stories in the full context of their readers' experiences. Instead, journalists presuppose--or rather superimpose--their vision of America, their understanding of their readers' experiences. Too often, therefore, journalists operate with a frame of reference Michael Novak finds subtley arrogant and blatantly unfair:

> The major metropolitan organs proceed as if they were reporting on a more or less homogenized melting pot with a "citywide" perspective. But a majority of the citizens in any neighborhood almost certainly do not maintain a citywide perspective in their daily lives. This is why so many Americans feel that the media leave them out, forget them, do not notice them. When they do appear in a news item it is ordinarily in the grossest of clichés: a "tight-knit ethnic neighborhood, with row after row of neat homes, where men and women work hard to make ends meet. . ." (13)

Unwilling and largely unable to capture the values, customs, and traditions indigenous to any one community--and thus unable to preserve and protect the ethos of local culture--newspapers seek to reach as large and as amorphous a readership as their circulation departments might conceive. Publishers long ago abandoned civic boundaries in search of "retail trade zones" and "standard metropolitan statistical areas" and other territories ordinarily associated with marketing, not journalism. Publishers today talk not in terms of communities but audiences, and this alone underscores the fundamental conflict between news as a journalistic ethic and profit as a business ethic, a conflict Bagdikian describes as the peculiar agony of a "godless corporation run for profit" and a "community institution operated for the public good." (14)

Decidedly, the twentieth century newspaper is a species of mass media, an agency of information and entertainment--ostensibly an agency of "news"--whose profit maximization rests on a sufficiently homogenized treatment of the day's events, issues, and personalities. Today's daily press--the metropolitan and suburban daily in particular--favors and fortifies not a mosaic of local cultures but a fully assimilated society with a "common" culture. To be sure, media pluralism exists not in terms of intermedia or even intramedia diversity but almost solely in terms of media abundance, a state of affairs wholly inimical to the needs of a culturally plural society. That the press retains its image as a local institution while it strives to improve its economies of scale by distributing "imported" news and by adopting an essentially

secular perspective is as curious as it is the unfortunate consequence of abundance without diversity.

At bottom, then, the issue is not one of social responsibility but of cultural ecology, the subtle but devastating disregard for, as Dewey puts it, a "life of free and enriching communion." (15) For as important as mass media are for the growth and prosperity of the larger society, they inevitably confine us to "an ambiguous world of clutter and curiosity"; (16) they tend to emancipate and "massify" the individual and thus create what the French philosopher Jacques Ellul calls "conformed, integrated wholes," a social order more totalitarian than democratic. (17) Consequently, as the distinction between mass communication and journalism continues to blur, the press can only personify--rather than combat--what Gouldner describes as the "proliferating pathologies of urbanism": individualism, insecurity, anxiety, family dissolution, personal anonymity, and the breakdown of neighborhoods. (18)

If, as Irving Kristol suggests, the challenge to our urban democracy is "to evolve a set of values and a conception of democracy that can function as the equivalent of the 'republican morality' of yesteryear," (19) then the challenge to our press is clear: to sustain an identifiable "moral order" within the vast and barren metropolis. The newspaper's special commitment to democracy thus goes beyond bringing about an informed public opinion: the press must also instill a feeling of community, a sense of identity among those very publics whose opinions it nurtures. News, therefore, is something more than an astonishing --and often inebriating--array of facts and figures. Indeed, a

story is a news story only as it has a local and meaningful context; for unlike the fare of mass media, news is more an artifact of culture than a commodity, a story more likely to be diffused than distributed. Simply put, information becomes news only in its connection to community, a criterion advanced by Robert Park several decades ago: "there is and there can be no such thing as news, in so far as concerns politics, except in a community in which there is a body of tradition and common understanding in terms of which events are ordinarily interpreted." (20)

II

News as communication is at once both instrumental and consummatory. In its instrumental stage news aids in the process of current adjustment; it is a phase of action, a story whose value lies in the foresight it affords. In its consummatory stage, however, news is immediately pleasurable; it is enjoyed for its own sake, a story whose value rests on the empathy it engenders.

As Carey recognizes, the instrumental and the consummatory are the two principal dimensions or phases of news; one neither confirms nor denies the other. (21) The difference between the two, however, is as fundamental as the difference between action and appreciation, doing and enjoying. When, for example, we read a newspaper to satisfy a need or to acquire an advantage, we are, following Park, experiencing the power of the press. (22) But when reading a newspaper serves to heighten our appreciation for the commonality of experience, when the day's news contributes to what Dewey calls a "clear consciousness of a communal life," (23)

our experience transcends the utility or usefulness of the press; with an acknowledging nod to George Herbert Mead, we are experiencing the aesthetic appeal of news.

Whether news has an aesthetic function, Mead once offered in a brief but insightful aside, depends upon whether the story "serves to interpret to the reader his experiences as the shared experiences of the community of which he feels himself to be a part." (24) Or as we might infer from Park, news in its consummatory phase can bring about or at least make possible

> that consensus and understanding among the individual components of a social group which eventually gives it and them the character not merely of a society but of a cultural unit. It spins a web of custom and mutual expectations which binds together social entities as diverse as the family group, a labor organization, or the haggling participants in a village market. (25)

Reading a newspaper without reference to the importance of the news requires no action, no commitment, no self-involvement, no sense of urgency; rather it serves to establish cooperation and provides for the sharing of experiences. Through the newspaper "wandering minds" are able to "meet and unite"; there is, de Tocqueville observed well over a century ago, a necessary connection between public associations and the press: "newspapers make associations and associations make newspapers." (26)

As an aesthetic experience--aesthetic in the sense of being contemplative rather than creative--news is an end in itself, a

point William Stephenson makes repeatedly when he characterizes newsreading as "communication-pleasure." Experientially, Stephenson proposes, news consumption is an interlude, a departure from the day's responsibilities and obligations; it is an interruption, usually a welcomed one. And so to fully appreciate the "intrinsic delight" of newsreading, the reader must be--at least for the moment--disinterested. In principle, Mead illustrates this well: "The artisan who stops to sense the nice perfection of a tool or a machine has interrupted its use to appreciate it, and is in an aesthetic mood. He is not interested in its employment, he is enjoying it." (27) But unlike Mead's artisan, who may only on occasion find himself in an aesthetic mood, reading a newspaper is an expected interruption, one to which we look forward with an unmistakable regularity. "For the habitual newsreader," Stephenson explains "a newspaper stands outside the immediate satisfactions or needs of the day--it interrupts one's daytime activities rather than otherwise. Yet one reads a paper regularly, recurrently: it becomes part of one's way of style of life." (28)

Thus the joy of consummation is, in Stephenson's words, "a step in the existential direction." Never self-involved in the sense that "it matters to us, as self, to our sense of pride, conceit, or the like," the reader is "free" to be thoroughly absorbed and thus self-enhanced:

> when one is absorbed in doing something, like reading a newspaper intently, all sense of self is absent;

> afterwards you may say how much you enjoyed it, but at the time there was no self-reference, no pride, no vanity, no sense of oneself, no wish, no being-with-anything, no intrusion of the self upon the news. How, then, is the self at issue in such absorption? Note that what is at issue is not deep concentration . . . it is merely quiet absorption in the news. Indeed . . . in such absorption one is being highly subjective, and . . . the report afterwards about it is that one has enjoyed it! It is more like being in a trance than being in touch with reality. (29)

Not to be confused with being amused or aroused, the consummatory value of news is something more refined, more developed, more sophisticated than an entirely salacious response. Certainly nothing as primitive as a lewd photograph or a catchy headline is likely to qualify as communication-pleasure. On the contrary, reading a newspaper can be thought of as an aesthetic experience only when it "infuses meaning" into the detail of experience: "A genuine aesthetic effect is produced," Mead explains, "if the pleasure in that which is seen serves to bring out the values of the life one lives." (30)

Thus as it instills a sense of belonging, reading a newspaper is, to borrow from Carey, less a matter of "sending or gaining information and more like attending a mass: a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed." (31) A newspaper, then, is

dramatically and intrinsically satisfying not as it imparts information but as it represents shared beliefs. As an affective experience newsreading carries us into the realm of the reverie and projects before us a world of contending forces, a "presentation of reality that gives to life an overall form, order, and tone"; (32) it adds distinction to utility.

III

Nothing as mundane as an editor's pledge to fairness or a reporter's commitment to truth will explain a newspaper's lasting appeal. Rather, what attracts a loyal readership--the "constant reader," Lippmann called it (33)--is a newspaper's effort to align itself with its readers' "aims, beliefs, and aspirations." It is, simply, the form of the news, its symbolic import, which externalizes the reverie. As a self contained whole the news story assumes an importance of its own, especially when it interprets the social experiences of readers and provides the gratification of those experiences as shared by the community to which they belong. Thus the imagery a story creates, not the "facts" a writer presents, accounts for the aesthetic quality of news; and in this sense, Mead advises, "an intelligent newspaper management may lead its readers, but it can never get far away from the form of the news which their reveries demand." (34)

The ultimate challenge for any storyteller, then, is to seize the imagination of the reader and to share with the reader a reality that captures and in some way interprets or diagnoses the ideals

created by the community. But for the journalist-as-storyteller, unhappily, the challenge is strictly academic because the canons of contemporary journalism call for a detached and distant "reporter," an impartial and generally passive link between sources and audiences. If journalism was once, in Carey's terms, "a fluid interpretation of actions and actors, an effort to create a semantic reality that invested the ordinary with significance," it metamorphosed into something very different: a technique, a largely deintellectualized "capacity to translate the specialised language and purposes of government, science, art, medicine, finance into an idiom that can be understood by broader, more amorphous, less educated audiences." (33) Journalists today are truly "professional communicators," an eclectic breed of amanuensis whose skills and talents are more characteristic of the technician than the craftsman. With little or no need to maintain a direct and intimate acquaintance with issues, events, and personalities, journalists are free to report on a bewildering variety of topics they only "know about" through presumably reliable sources. (34) In much the same way--and for essentially the same reason--reporters today can "succeed" with little or no acquaintance with, appreciation for, or commitment to the lives of their readers.

That the gap between journalists and their readers continues to widen became abundantly evident when President Carter went on radio for a "call-in" press conference. In striking contrast to the kinds of questions our Washington correspondents might ask, the questions most listeners wanted answered focused on conditions peculiar to their community. When the President was asked to respond

to a national or internationsl issue, an answer in the abstract proved unsatisfactory; what listeners wanted was a response to the issue's local and immediate consequences. "I've had the feeling for some time," an editor of a Massachusetts daily quipped, "that perhaps the interests of Joe Six-packs and the Washington press corps are different." Or as the managing editor of the Sacramento (California) Bee observed, "Our concerns aren't nearly as homely as those of people we put out newspapers for." (37)

And no doubt when journalists fail to describe an issue in terms that impinge directly on the lives of their readers, journalists and their stories become less appealing. A recent study commissioned by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, for example, finds that an important factor in declining readership is the "impersonal nature of most newspapers, their remoteness from ordinary people"; readers feel, the study warns, "little emotional attachment and less loyalty to newspapers whose editors and reporters are strangers to them." (38)

As our nation's editors might conclude from the very study they commissioned, a newspaper has an "aesthetic effect" not because it is produced locally but when and because it exhibits a concern for local understandings, an awareness of the local language, and an appreciation for the integrity of local conditions. More than a great abundance of newspapers, only a truly diverse press and a view of journalism which sees the newspaper as a democratic organ whose democratic character is derived from "community associations, not from its integrating position in a national society,"

can restore to the journalist the "common sense and logic of the small town or neighborhood." (39)

Ideally, to compensate for the pervasive presence of mass communication--and to shake the shackles of a mass society--each and every community needs its own distinctive newspaper. In practice, however, Novak's proposal seems to be a reasonable compromise: "that reporters go into communities in order to express the perspective, the way of life, and the attitudes of that community" so accurately that people say, "That's how I feel." (40)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. John Dewey, The Public and Its Problems (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1927).
2. Robert A. Nisbet, The Quest for Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 279.
3. Lary S. Belman, "John Dewey's Concept of Communication," Journal of Communication, 27 (1977), p. 35.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), pp. 5-6.
7. The variety of representations of community notwithstanding, the idea itself is strangely neglected. See Raymond Plant, "Community: Concept, Conception, and Ideology," Politics & Society, 8 (1978), pp. 79-107.
8. Gerald D. Suttles, The Social Construction of Communities (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).
9. Ibid., p. 264.
10. Ben H. Bagdikian, The Information Machines (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 70.
11. Herbert I. Schiller, The Mind Managers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 19.
12. "Derivative" and "generative" are terms used to denote a continuum of original newspaper content. See Thomas E. Patterson and Ronald P. Abeles, "Mass Communications Research and

12. (continued)
the 1976 Presidential Campaign," Items (Social Science Research Council), 2 (1975), pp. 13-18.

13. Michael Novak, "The People and the News." in M. Barrett (ed.) Moments of Truth? (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975), pp. 199-200.

14. Ben H. Bagdikian, The Effete Conspiracy (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 8.

15. John Dewey, Intelligence in the Modern World (N.Y.: Modern Library, 1939), p. 400.

16. Hanno Hardt, "The Dilemma of Mass Communication: An Existential Point of View," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 5 (1972), p. 187.

17. Clifford G. Christians, "Jacques Ellul and Democracy's 'Vital Information' Premise," Journalism Monographs, 45 (1976), p. 18.

18. Alvin W. Gouldner, The Dialectic of Ideology & Technology (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 20.

19. Irving Kristol, On the Democratic Idea in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 21.

20. Robert E. Park, "News and the Power of the Press," in Society (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1955), p. 125.

21. James W. Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," Communication, 2 (1975), pp. 1-22.

22. Park, pp. 115-125.

23. Dewey, The Public and Its Problems, p. 149.

24. George Herbert Mead, "The Nature of the Aesthetic Experience," in A.J. Peck (ed.), The Selected Writings of George Herbert Mead (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), p. 302.
25. Robert E. Park, "Reflections On Communication and Culture," in B. Berelson and M. Janowitz (eds.), Reader in Public Opinion Communication (New York: Free Press, 1966), p. 167.
26. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Vol. II, H. Reeve (trans.) (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 135.
27. Mead, p. 279.
28. William Stephenson, "The Ludenic Theory of Newsreading," Journalism Quarterly, 41 (1964), p. 370.
29. William Stephenson, The Play Theory of Mass Communication (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 51-52.
30. Mead, p. 304.
31. Carey, p. 8.
32. Ibid.
33. Walter Lippmann, "The Constant Reader," in Public Opinion (New York: Free Press, 1965), pp. 208-213.
34. Mead, p. 302.
35. James W. Carey, "The Communications Revolution and the Professional Communicator," in P. Halmos (ed.) "Sociology of Mass Media Communicators," The Sociological Review Monograph, 13 (1969), p. 32.
36. I am borrowing liberally here from William James, who proposes two "broadly and practically distinguishable" types of knowledge: "knowledge of acquaintance" and "knowledge-about."

36. (continued)

I am also indebted to Robert Park, who creatively applies James' typology. See William James, The Principles of Psychology, Vol. I (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1896), pp. 221-222; and Robert E. Park, "News As a Form of Knowledge," in C.S. Steinberg (ed.) Mass Media and Communication (New York: Hastings House, 1966), pp. 127-141.

37. James M. Naughton, "Reporters' Questions Show 'Gap' Between Press and Public," The New York Times, March 9, 1977, p. 27.

38. Ruth Clark, Changing Needs of Changing Readers (Charlotte N.C.: American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1979), p. 3.

39. James W. Carey and Norman Sims, "The Telegraph and the News Report," paper presented to the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism, University of Maryland, August, 1976, p. 3.

40. Novak, p. 197.